

Telephone interview with former PhM3/c Ross Bryan, World War II hospital corpsman. Assigned to USS *Franklin* (CV-13). Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 7 July 2005.

Where are you from originally?

I was born and raised in Dayton, OH.

When did you join the Navy?

I was drafted in April 1943.

So they were actually drafting into the Navy at that time?

Yes. I was married and had a child then.

I haven't actually spoken to anyone who was drafted into the Navy.

Well, I was drafted and I chose the Navy.

So you had a choice?

When you went through your physical, at the bottom of your card, they put A or N. So I had my choice of Army or Navy. You had to pass a certain physical. I'm not sure how I did that.

Where did you go to boot camp?

Great Lakes.

Were you given a choice there to become a corpsman?

Actually, I graduated from high school the year before, in 1941, and went to work in a factory. So when I went to boot camp, my choice was to be a machinist's mate. But about the seventh week of boot camp, they put everyone in our company in the medics. So no matter what your qualifications were for anything, it didn't matter.

Then I had to go to hospital corps school. I did that for 6 weeks at Great Lakes. When we went through that school, they told us we would get 2 years of medical school in 6 weeks. It did seem like it. It was mostly first aid and that type of thing. But you still had to learn all the basics.

Where were you assigned after you graduated?

I went to Brooklyn Naval Hospital and was there for about 3 months. Then I was assigned to the *Franklin*, which they were just building. It was being built at Newport News, VA.

Do you remember the very first time you saw the ship?

Yes, I do. It wasn't quite finished but almost. Oh, was it big! It was huge. You know how big they are. Of course they're bigger now than they were then. It was there at Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock. I think it was commissioned in January of '44. Then we went for shakedown.

So you were assigned right from the beginning.

Yes, the original crew. I was on it until the end of the war.

After the shakedown and the ship headed for the Pacific, what was your specific assignment?

We had about 35 people in the medical division. Every few weeks you changed your assignment. Sometimes you worked in the sick bay and sometimes in the operating room. Sometimes you worked in the medical treatment room. No one was assigned to one thing for all time. You shifted around. I spent a total of about 6 weeks in the operating room where we did all kinds of surgery. This was on the way out and not in the battle area. Out there, you only did emergency surgery. We did a couple of tonsillectomies, emergency appendectomies, and things like that. We had a full operating room. It was just like a little hospital.

Did you work with Dr. [James L.] Fuelling?

I worked with Dr. [James L.] Fuelling and Dr. [George W.] Fox. CDR Smith was the head of the medical department and didn't do any surgery. Dr. Fox was the only reserve doctor. The rest were regular Navy. Dr. Fox was the main surgeon. He did 90 percent of all the surgeries.

Did you assist with some of those?

Yes. I didn't know too much, but they helped me along. It was interesting.

Did you go through the Panama Canal?

Oh, yes. We had to then. We were pretty wide and our flight deck overhung the docks as we went through.

What do you remember about that cruise out to the Pacific?

If you're talking about the ocean itself, it was unending. For me it was exciting. Being from Ohio, I had never seen the ocean before we went on shakedown in the Atlantic.

When the ship got closer to the battle areas, did the procedures change?

Not really. From the time we left Pearl Harbor, we were under so-called battle conditions. We'd have our general quarters in the morning and in the evening. So it was just as though we were in the battle area. We knew when we were getting close, though. Our ship's agenda came out every day and you could tell whether we were going to fly any sorties or not. On the way out, our aircraft were practicing landings and takeoffs.

By this time, you had the air groups aboard.

Air Group 13 came aboard in San Diego.

So you went to San Diego after you transited the Canal.

Yes. And we were there for a couple of days.

Did you get to know Dr. [Samuel] Sherman at all?

Very briefly. As I recall, Dr. Sherman wasn't on the ship that long. Dr. [James T.] Moy

was our flight surgeon our first tour we had out there. Dr. Sherman came aboard when we were in Bremerton, WA, before we went out for the last time. So he was only on there a couple of months.

So, as far as you know, there are no physicians now alive from that era.

I doubt it very much. Dr. Sherman and Dr. Moy are gone, and Dr. Fox died on the ship. Dr. Smith was older than they were and I'm certain he's not living any more. He'd be way up in his 90s.

When did you start to see action for the first time?

We were hit three times in October. We were hit by a suicide plane on October 13th, I think it was. A suicide plane went right across our flight deck and killed a guy before going into the water. And then on the 30th, we had a suicide plane hit. That was pretty bad. We lost 50 or so people then. Then we came back to Bremerton and we were in there for almost 2 months being repaired.

What do you remember about taking care of the casualties of that attack?

Actually, I only took care of two of them from that attack. And that was up in officer's quarters underneath the flight deck. Mostly, there were just dead. There weren't too many injured.

Did you actually witness the attack or were you below when it happened?

I was below. Normally, I would have been on the flight deck because that was my battle station.

Did you feel the plane hit?

No. If you were down below, you couldn't feel very much. He crashed into the afterdeck by the afterdeck elevator.

But you say most of the men were dead so there weren't people to treat.

Not very many.

Did they bring them down to the sick bay?

Yes. We saw some bad burns. You know, when they first came up with penicillin, it was early in the war. It was used for a lot of different things. One of the things we used it for was for burns. We'd take a thin film of gauze, put it over the burn area, and then put penicillin over that. When it healed, it left like a little mesh look on the arm or wherever it was. And it would heal up. That was one of the early uses for penicillin.

So after the attack, the ship was so badly damaged that you went back to the Navy Yard at Bremerton for repairs.

Yes. And a lot of the crew changed, including our own Dr. Sherman. The air group was changed and, of course, the surgeon always went with the air group. That's one reason a lot of

people died on the 19th of March because a lot of them didn't know the ship very well. As a medic, you needed to know every place on the ship, if you were needed. A lot of these fellows were only on the ship for a month or two at the most. I'm certain some of them might have lost their lives because they got lost. We'll never know for sure.

They weren't familiar with the escape routes.

That's right.

After the ship was repaired and you went back out to the Pacific, when was that?

I would have been the end of January or the first of February, somewhere in there.

And you headed right for Japan.

Yes. By that time the war had gone further west toward Japan. So we went to Eniwetok or Saipan, then on out to join the fleet.

And then that terrible day in March happened. What do you remember about that day?

I had had my breakfast after we secured from general quarters. I had then gone into the head. I happened to look at the overboard discharge and saw something go flying by. So I jumped up and saw pieces of things coming down and knew we were hit. So I got out of there real quick.

There were two patients in the sick bay--the ward where all the bunks were. I told them they had better get out of there. Then I grabbed a couple of towels and wet them down in the drinking fountain. We were taught to do that because you needed to cover your face if there was smoke.

So I took the two wet towels and stepped out of the sick bay into the passageway. Then there was another explosion which put me right through the next hatch. I wasn't hurt.

So the force of the explosion just pushed you through the hatch.

Yes. Then I went up to the second deck. Sick bay was on the third deck. When I got up to the second deck, it turns out that there were about a hundred guys there a lined up along this large passageway just sitting on the deck. That was right under the hangar deck.

This was the deck just beneath the hangar deck.

Yes. And that's where all the fire was on the hangar deck.

Because the bombs had penetrated the flight deck and began exploding all those fueled and armed aircraft.

Yes. We sat there and counted the explosions. There were something like 30 or 40 of them. The fire had spread to where our ammunition was stored. We were there for about 3 hours.

You were trapped on that deck with all those people.

Yes. It was a long passageway that ran clear to the forward end of the ship. We couldn't open the hatch to go up on the hangar deck because there was fire up there. So we just sat there.

You must have been a little worried by that time.

Pretty worried. I had these two towels and used them a little. Fortunately, it wasn't too smoky so that was okay.

I don't know the exact time but the hatch all the way up at the forward end of the ship was opened to the flight deck. One by one we got through the passageway all the way to the forward end of the ship, climbed a ladder, and crawled out onto the flight deck.

What did you see when you got up there?

Well, the ship was listing pretty bad. I saw a lot of survivors up there. There were guys hosing down the fire. The fire on the flight deck was pretty well controlled by that time, and on the hangar deck, too. It was bad!

Did you see a lot of casualties?

Again, there were more people killed than there were wounded. It seemed like you were either dead or you were okay. We did have a lot of casualties, of course, but by the time we got up there, which had taken about 3 hours, the wounded were pretty well taken care of. A lot of them had been transferred to the *Santa Fe*.

You could see the *Santa Fe* up alongside?

Yes. The cruiser came alongside and we transferred a lot of wounded. I went, too.

How did you do that, by litter?

Some by litter. Somebody had put a plank over, sort of a walkway. I'm not sure how many survivors we had that we sent over there.

Wouldn't that transfer have been pretty difficult because your flight deck was so much higher than the *Santa Fe*'s deck?

We were listing toward the cruiser. The flight deck was normally about 80 feet from the water. But in this case, it was a lot less than that because we were listing so bad. If I recall right, I think we came down on one of the *Santa Fe*'s gun mounts.

You were helping with these patients?

The doctor sent two of us over there to help with the wounded.

So they sent you to the *Santa Fe*.

Yes. Another corpsman and I--Earle Barth--who was from Michigan City, Indiana, and a good friend of mine. Anyway, they sent us over there. We were on the *Santa Fe* for 5 days but we didn't do anything. The guys on *Santa Fe* said, "No. You don't need to worry about it." They wouldn't let us do anything. They were really great.

Were you able to see what was going on on the *Franklin* from there?

Oh, yes. But then not too long after that, we pulled away. Then the cruiser *Pittsburgh*

came along and took the *Franklin* under tow with a tow chain. I didn't actually see them hook that up.

Could you see the ship being towed?

From a distance, yes. We had pulled away by this time.

Was it still listing pretty badly?

Oh, yes. The next day it was much better. They finally got the list taken care of.

Did you go back to the *Franklin* after that?

Yes. We were taken over on a boat and had to climb up a jacobs ladder to get back on. I wanted to get back on the *Franklin* and go back with the ship. Some of the wounded who weren't in too bad a shape went back, too.

What did you see once you got back aboard?

It was just a mess. The compartments were all flooded and they were still finding bodies after 5 days, and burying them at sea. They had already buried most of the fellas by the time I got back aboard. Most of them were killed by the fires and explosions on the hangar deck when everything first happened.

What was your job at this point?

Our job was to clean up the sick bay area as best we could and salvage what we could. We threw an x-ray machine over the side and all kinds of medical instruments. They had been packed in sterile packages but were now underwater and soaked. We had to throw everything away. It was all expendable.

What shape was the sick bay in at that point?

Bad shape. Bad shape. We couldn't operate at all. If someone had minor cuts and bruises, we could do those kinds of things but not much else. Sick bay wasn't blown completely apart or anything like that but it was pretty bad.

Before I had gotten back aboard the ship, they had found six or seven dead corpsmen in the sick bay ward where I had started out that morning. They had gone in there, closed the hatch, and sealed it. Evidently, they had thought there was smoke coming in. Dr. Fox was in there with them and they all died right there, within a couple of feet of where I started out. So I was thankful I left when I did.

They died from smoke inhalation or . . .

Suffocation. They used all the air. They were afraid to open the hatch for fear that the fire would come in. We'll never know for sure.

The ship went under its own power all the way back to New York.

Yes, it did.

Were you on it the whole time?

Oh, yes. We went back through the Canal. We were pretty well cleaned up by the time we got back to Hawaii.

By this time, the most severely injured had already been taken off.

Yes. We had no injured on there.

What was it like coming into New York with that ship being so badly damaged?

I had been to New York before because I worked at the Brooklyn Naval Hospital for a few months. It was kind of exciting in one way and in another way it was very sad.

We got a big reception. Of course, it wasn't like it is today. Today, if a ship got hit, you'd know it 5 minutes later. But back then, no one even knew we got hit until we got to New York. It hadn't appeared in the paper. In those days, they had a lot tighter security newswise than we have today. We weren't allowed to write home or call home and tell everybody about it because they didn't want the enemy to know about it.

But it did make the papers when we got to New York. I saved all the newspapers and I've got a scrapbook full of them.

Did you dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard?

Yes. And they put us in dry dock right away. Everybody then had to leave the ship. In May, my wife and daughter came up to Brooklyn and we got an apartment and lived there about 5 months.

What did you do that summer?

I went to the ship every day. We had sick call if anybody needed treatment. There really wasn't much to do. We were waiting for the ship to get fixed up. The war was still going on.

And they never finished fixing all the damage.

No. They fixed it up pretty well. The last time I saw it, there was still a lot yet to be done. But then they scrapped it a few years later.

Were you still there in Brooklyn when the war ended?

Yes. I was discharged at Pier 92. Actually I got discharged the day before Thanksgiving of '45 and left the day after that. You needed so many points to get out. And I had the points.

Did you go back to Ohio?

Yes. I went back to Ohio and resumed my life. I went to work at the National Cash Register Company in Dayton. I worked there a few years and then took a sales job in northern Ohio where I live now. I did that for 30 some years as a traveling salesman.

Did you ever get active in the *Franklin* reunion group?

No. I've never been active. I never went to any of the reunions.

Well, it's been 60 years since all that happened. Do you think about it much anymore?

Not really. Every once in a while somebody mentions it. I have pictures on my wall in this room I'm sitting in now. No, I don't really think about it all that much.

I want to thank you for spending time with me this morning.

Thanks for calling. I enjoyed talking to you.